

ARE POSSIBLE WORLDS REALLY REAL?

In the “Butterfly Effect” the hero, Evan tries to improve his situation by altering events in the past. George, the small-town hero of Frank Capra’s movie “Wonderful Life” is forced to contemplate a possible world in which he never existed, and in “Fatherland”, a novel by Robert Harris, (later filmed), we see a possible world of the 1950’s in which Hitler had won the war, and Joseph Kennedy was President of the USA.

In each of these cases, the protagonists have experiences of worlds which are not the actual world, but which are possible worlds. Possible worlds are the way things might have been, or the way things might be. George of “Wonderful Life” experiences a world in which he had never been born, and sees that his existence has made a difference to things. Evan, in “Butterfly” tries to change the state of the world using an ability to alter things in the past. In his case, each of the worlds experienced are a deterioration from the previous one.

Possible worlds may be “states of affairs”, or universes. Some writers speak of a multiverse, implying a number of possible universes which exist alongside the one which we consider to be the actual universe. Some of these worlds will include us, though in different circumstances, some of them will exclude us. The idea is also a fascination of science fiction writers, under the guise of parallel universes

But are these possible worlds as real as the actual world that we are convinced we live in? David Lewis is well known for his extreme position, in that he suggests that the multiverse of all possible worlds should be considered to be as real as the actual world. Should we not argue that George and Evan are experiencing something which is for them, real? The situations described in “Fatherland”, “Butterfly Effect” and “Wonderful Life” are good examples of alternative possible worlds which might well be, if events in the actual world had been different. In the case of the first two movies, the possible worlds become actualised, and so are real.

However, it seems intuitively reasonable to think that only the actual world is real. Possible worlds cannot be real, in the sense that the actual world is real; they either never came into being, or are only future possibilities.

However, if we leave aside the question of reality for a moment, then the notion of alternative possible worlds still has impact. The hero of Capra’s movie certainly considered the possible reality of the world without his presence real enough to alter his future behaviour. The use made of alternative worlds by Leibnitz is well known; in that he tried to prove the benevolence of God by suggesting that he selected the best of all possible worlds. His argument still casts doubt on the possible omnipotence of God, in that it implies that he cannot create a perfect world. The notion of the reality of possible worlds might also have attractions for those wishing to support free will – we can visualise a very real situation had things not been as they are. George sees that his existence has beneficial effects by comparing the world in which he lives with the world in which he never was. However, it could be pointed out that alternative worlds might not contradict determinism. Evan, in the “Butterfly Effect” finds that changing the state of things does not improve his situation.

It is also possible to use the concept of possible worlds to conduct thought experiments. Consideration of a possible world where things are not as they actually are, but have some important difference often lead to valuable insights which might have consequences for action. It should be noticed however, that the phrase “intuition pumps” to

describe some thought experiments indicates the views that some philosophers have of this technique. Also, many philosophers disparagingly cite possible worlds and fictionalism as part of the same untenable method of exploring truth. We cannot know the truth about some concepts using the normal methods of experimentation, so we invent useful fictions (or possible worlds) to help us think about the possibilities.

Without having to accept David Lewis's arguments for the reality of possible worlds, we can easily see its validity as a reasoning technique. Propositions which are true in all possible worlds can be validly described as necessarily true, whereas propositions which are true in some, but not all worlds can be described as "possibly true". The field of modal logic makes valuable use of the concept of possible worlds

Intuitively, we tend to equate the notion of the real world with the world, or state of affairs which currently exists. Perhaps it would be sounder if we thought of this world and the multiverse of possible worlds as things which are conceptually different. For example, I may have a set of photographs of myself which represent me, but are nevertheless not me. Thus the multiverse of all possible worlds is a set of things which are different from the actual world. Even if one of them identically reproduces the actual world, it is still not the actual world. This set of possible worlds is real only in the sense that any of them validly might have been, or might still be. We do not have any analytical methods for discussing the reality, or otherwise of different possible worlds, and how they relate to the actual world.

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